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Left: Renee Robinson with Matthew Rushing, a 2010 *Dance Magazine* awardee. Below: Robinson in Ailey's *Blues Suite*, circa 1990.

RENEE ROBINSON

This month Renee Robinson will make her last signature entrance as the “woman with the umbrella” in Alvin Ailey’s *Revelations*. As always, the audience will roar when they see her in full white baptismal regalia, one arm holding the umbrella high above her head, while the other waves rhythmically, and her hips navigate her regal glide, as she slithers across the stage.

Selected by Ailey in 1989 to lead this famous “Wade in the Water” section, Robinson certainly holds her own. She also claims the stage in other Ailey works, such as his barrelhouse ballet *Blues Suite*, where she personifies the word sultry in the “Backwater Blues” duet, and the coveted female solo *Cry*, where she devours all three sections with funk, truth, and more funk, telling not only Ailey’s story about women, but we truly believe it’s her story too. Not to be forgotten is Judith Jamison’s *Hymn*, where in her solo Renee dances to her own words about searching for perfection. In current works like Ronald K. Brown’s *Grace*, Renee’s embracing magic underscores Brown’s commitment to spirituality. And just last season in Rennie Harris’ *Home* one couldn’t help but smile when Robinson finally enters offering up some of Rennie’s fast footwork, hunkered over, grooving as only she could to some serious house music.

After all, titles such as “star” or “the epitome of passion” only come with seasoning. Three decades



of seasoning as a member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, to be exact. In fact, Robinson holds the longest tenure of any female member of the Ailey Company—31 years, and she is the only company member to have performed under all three artistic directors.

The Ailey star says she is proud to have been trained in classical ballet by African-American dance teachers from the Jones-Haywood School of Ballet in Washington, DC. Among her many accomplishments: She received two Ford Foundation scholarships to the School of American Ballet and a full scholarship to the Dance Theatre of Harlem School. Yet another full scholarship, this time to The Ailey School, would begin her Ailey journey, which she sustained as a member of the workshop company, then Ailey II, until she joined the Ailey company in 1981. Now, after decades of performing *Revelations*, Renee only gets better. For example, when she returns for the final, “yellow section,” complete with fan, church dress, hat, and stool, the crowd fol-

lows her every move. She is the gossip when her fan speeds up to “speak,” or the wife, when she points that fan, scolding her “husband.” Renee says that it’s still new for her after so many years because that ballet brings back memories. Memories like Mr. Ailey explaining how vital it was for them to feel the heat of the sun forcing them to use the fans to cool themselves. Now she happily shares these memories with young company members whom she unofficially mentors. —Charmaine Patricia Warren